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"I AM SET FOR THE DEFENCE OF THE GOSPEL."

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FINNEY'S LECTURES.

LECTURE XVI.

TEXT.—"Again I say unto you, That if two of you shall agree on earth, touching any thing that they shall ask, it shall be done for them of my Father which is in heaven."—MATTHEW XVIII. 19.

Some weeks since, I used this text, in preaching on the subject of prayer-meetings. At present I design to enter more into the spirit and meaning of the text.—The evident design of our Lord in this text was to teach the importance and influence of union in prayer and effort to promote religion. He states the strongest possible case by taking the number two, as the least number between whom there can be an agreement, and says that "where two of you are agreed on earth, as touching any thing that they shall ask, it shall be done for them of my Father which is in heaven." It is the fact of their agreement, upon which he lays the stress, and mentioning the number two, appears to have been designed merely to afford encouragement to the smallest number between whom there can be an agreement. But what are we to understand by being "agreed as touching" the things we shall ask? I will answer this question under the two following heads:

I. By showing that we are to be "agreed" in prayer.

II. We are to agree in every thing that is essential to obtaining the blessing that we seek.

I. In order to come within this promise, we are to be agreed in prayer. This is particularly taught in the text. "That is."

1. We should agree in our desires for the object. It is necessary to have desires for the object, and to be agreed in those desires. Very often individuals pray in words for the same thing, when they are by no means agreed in desiring that thing. Nay, perhaps some of them, in their hearts desire the very opposite. People are called upon to pray for an object, and they all pray for it in words, but God knows they often do not desire it, and perhaps he sees that the hearts of some may, all the while, be resisting the prayer.

2. We must agree in the motive from which we desire the object. It is not enough that our desires for an object should be the same, but the reasons why we desire it must be the same. An individual may desire a revival for the glory of God and the salvation of sinners. Another member of the church may also desire a revival, but for very different motives. Some, perhaps, desire a revival in order to have the congregation built up and strengthened, so as to make it more easy for them to pay their expenses in supporting the gospel. Another desires a revival for the sake of having the church increased so as to be more numerous and more respectable. Others desire a revival because they have been opposed or evil spoken of, and they wish to have their enemies know that whatever they may think or say, God blesses them. Sometimes people desire a revival from mere natural affection, so as to have their friends converted and saved. If they mean to be so united in prayer as to obtain a blessing, they must not only desire the blessing, and be agreed in desiring it, but they must agree in desiring it for the same reasons.

3. We must be agreed in desiring it for good reasons. These desires must not only be united, and from the same motives, but they must be from good motives. The supreme motive must be to honor and glorify God. People may even desire a revival, and agree in desiring it, and agree in the motives, and yet if these motives are not good, God will not grant their desires. Thus parents may be agreed in prayer for the conversion of their children, and may have the same feelings and the same motives, and yet if they have no higher motives than because they are their children, their prayers will not be granted. They are agreed in the reason, but it is not the right reason.

In like manner, any number of persons might be agreed in their desires and motives, but if their motives are selfish, their being agreed in them will only make them more offensive to God. "How is it that ye have agreed together to tempt the spirit of the Lord?" I have seen a great deal of this, where churches have been engaged in prayer for an object, and their motives were evidently selfish. Sometimes they are engaged in praying for a

revival, and you would think by their earnestness and union that they would certainly move God to grant the blessing, till you find out the reason. And what is it? Why, they see their congregation is about to be broken up, unless something can be done. Or they see some other denomination gaining ground, and there is no way to counteract them but by having a revival in their church. And all their praying is only an attempt to get the Almighty to help them out of their difficulty, and is purely selfish and offensive to God. A woman in Philadelphia, was invited to attend a female prayer-meeting at a certain place. She inquired what they met there for, and for what they were going to pray? She was answered that they were going to pray for the outpouring of the spirit upon the city.—"Well," said she, "I shan't go, if they were going to pray for our congregation I would go, but I am not going there to pray for other churches!" O, what a spirit!

I have had a multitude of letters and requests that I should visit such and such places, and endeavor to promote a revival, and many reasons have been urged why I should go, but when I came to weigh their reasons, I have sometimes found every one of them selfish. And God would look upon every one with abhorrence.

In prayer-meetings, how often do we hear people offer such reasons why they desire such and such blessings, as are not right in the sight of God. Such reasons, that if they are the true ones, and if Christians are actually excited by those reasons, it would render their prayers not acceptable to God, because their motive was not right.

There are a great many things often said in favor of the cause of missions, which are of this character, appealing to wrong motives. How often are we told of six hundred millions of heathens, who are in danger of going to hell, and how little is said of the guilt of six hundred millions engaged and banded together as rebels against God, or of the dishonor and contempt poured upon God our Maker by such a world of outlaws. Now I know that God refers to those motives which appeal to our mere natural sympathies, and compassion, and uses them, but always in subordination to his glory. If these lower motives are placed foremost, it must always produce a defective piety and zeal, and a great deal that is false. Until the church will look at the dishonor done to God, little will be done. It is this which must be made to stand out before the world, it is this which must be deeply felt by the church, it is this which must be fully exhibited to sinners, before the world can ever be converted.

Parents never agree in praying for the conversion of their children in such a way as to have their prayers answered, until they feel that their children are rebels.—Parents often pray very earnestly for their children because they wish God to save them, and they almost think hard of God if he does not save their children. But if they would have their prayers prevail, they must come to take God's part against their children, even though for their perverseness and incorrigible wickedness he should be obliged to send them to hell.—I knew a woman who was very anxious for the salvation of her son, and she used to pray for him with agony, but still he remained impenitent, until at length she became convinced that her prayers and agonies had been nothing but the fond yearnings of parental feeling, and were not dictated at all by a just view of her son's character as a wilful and wicked rebel against God. And there was never any impression made on his mind until she was made to take strong ground against him as a rebel, and to look on him as deserving to be sent to hell. And then he was converted. The reason was, she never before was influenced by the right motive in prayer, desiring his salvation with a supreme regard to the glory of God.

4. If we would be so united as to prevail in prayer, we must agree in faith.—That is, we must concur in expecting the blessing prayed for. We must understand the reason why it is to be expected, we must see the evidence on which faith ought to rest, and must absolutely believe that the blessing will come, or we do not bring ourselves within the promise.—Faith is always understood as an indispensable condition of prevailing prayer. It is not expressed in any particular case, it is always implied, for no prayer can be effectual but that which is offered in faith. And in order that united prayer may prevail, there must be united faith.

5. So, again, we must be agreed as to the time when we desire the blessing to come. If two or more agree in desiring a particular blessing, and one of them desires to have it come now, while others are not ready to have it quite yet, it is plain they are not agreed. They are not united in regard to one essential point.—If the blessing is to come in answer to their united prayer, it must come as they prayed for it. And if it comes, it must be at some time. But if they disagree as to the time when they will have it, plainly it can never come in answer to their prayer.

Suppose a church should undertake to pray for a revival, and should be all agreed in desiring a revival, but not as to the time when it shall be. Suppose some wish to have the revival come now, and

are all prepared, and their hearts waiting for the Spirit of God to come down, and are willing to give time and attention and labor to it NOW; but others are not quite ready, they have something else to attend to just at present, some worldly object which they want to accomplish, some piece of business in hand and want just to finish this thing, and then—but they cannot possibly find time to attend to it now, they are not prepared to humble themselves, to search their hearts and break up their fallow ground, and put themselves in a posture to receive the blessing. Is it not plain that here is no real union, for they are not agreed in that which is essential? While one part are praying that the revival may come now, the others are praying with equal earnestness that it may not come now.

Suppose the question were now put to this church, whether you are agreed in praying for a revival of religion here?—Do you all desire a revival, and would you all like to have it come now? Would you be heartily agreed now to break down in the dust, and open your hearts to the Holy Ghost if he should come tonight? I do not ask what you would say, if I should propose the question. Perhaps if I should put it to you now, you would rise up and vote that you were agreed in desiring a revival, and agreed to have it now. You know how you ought to feel and what you ought to say, and you know you ought to be ready for a revival now. But I ask, would GOD see it to be so in your hearts, that you are agreed on this point? Has there been a time, since I came back from the country, that this church were all agreed in desiring and praying for a revival, and in wishing to have it come now? Have any two of you agreed on this point, and prayed accordingly? If not, when will you be agreed to pray for a revival? And if this church cannot be agreed among yourselves, how can you expect a revival? It is of no use for you to take the outward attitude, and stand up here and say you are agreed, when God reads the heart, and sees that you are not agreed. Here is the promise.—Again I say unto you, That if two of you shall agree on earth, as touching any thing that they shall ask, it shall be done for them of my Father which is in heaven." Now this is either true, or it is false. Which ground will you take? If it is true, then it is true that you are not agreed, and never have been, except in those cases where you have had a revival.

But we must agree not only upon a time, but it must be the present time, or we are not agreed in every thing essential to the work. Unless we agree to have the revival now, we shall not now use the means. But until the means are used, it cannot come. It is plain then, that we must be agreed upon the present time, that is, we are not agreed in the sense of the text, until we agree that now we will have the blessing, and conduct accordingly.

To agree upon a future time is of no use, for when that future time comes we must then be agreed upon that present time, and use means accordingly, so that you see you are never properly agreed until you agree that now is the time.

II. We are to agree in every thing that is essential to obtaining the blessing that we seek.

You see the language of the text, "If two of you shall agree as touching any thing that they shall ask." Many people seem to read it as if it referred merely to an agreement in asking, and they understand it to promise, that whenever two are agreed in asking for any blessing, it shall be given. But Christ says there must be an agreement "as touching" the thing prayed for. That is, the agreement or union must comprise every thing that is essential to the bestowment and reception of the blessing.

1. If Christians would enjoy the benefits of this promise in praying for a revival, they must be agreed in believing revivals of religion to be a reality. There are many individuals, even in the church, who do not in their hearts believe that the revivals which take place are the work of God. Some of them may pray in words for an outpouring of the Spirit and a revival of religion, while in their hearts they doubt whether there are any such things known in modern times. In united prayer there must be no hypocrisy.

2. They must agree in feeling the necessity of revivals. There are some who believe in the reality of revivals, as a work of God, while at the same time, they are unsettled as to the necessity of having them in order to the success of the gospel. They think there is a real work of God in revivals, but after all, perhaps it is quite as well to have sinners converted and brought into the church in a more quiet and gradual way, and without so much excitement. Whenever revivals are abroad in the land, and prevail, and are popular, they may appear in favor of them, and may put up their cold prayers for a revival, while at the same time they would be sorry on the whole, to have a revival come among them. They think it so much safer and better, to indoctrinate the people, and spread the matter before them in a calm way, and so bring them in gradually, and not run the danger of having animal feeling or wild-fire in their congregations.

3. They must be agreed in regard to the importance of revivals. Men are not

blessed with revivals, in answer to prayers that are not half in earnest. They must feel the infinite importance of a revival, before they will pray so as to prevail. Blessings of this kind are not granted but in answer to such prayers as arise from a sense of their importance. As I have shown before, when preaching on the subject of prevailing prayer, it is when we desire the blessing with UNUTTERABLE AGONY, that they offer such prayers as will infallibly prevail with God. Those who feel less of the importance of a revival may pray for it in words, but they will never have the blessing. But when a church has been united in prayer, and really felt the importance of a revival, they never have failed of having one. I do not believe a case can be found, of such a church being turned empty away. Such an agreement, when sincere, will secure an agreement also on all other subjects that are indispensable.

4. They must be agreed also, in having correct scriptural notions about several things connected with revivals.

(1.) The necessity of divine agency to produce a revival. It is not enough that they hold all this in theory, and pray for it in words. They must fully understand and deeply feel this necessity, they must realize their entire dependence on the Spirit of God, or the whole will fail.

(2.) Why divine agency is necessary. There must be an agreement on correct principles in regard to the reason that divine agency is so indispensable. If they get wrong ideas on this point, they will be hindered. If Christians get the idea that this necessity of divine influence lies in the inability of sinners, or if they feel as if God was under obligation to give the Holy Spirit, in order to make sinners able to obey the gospel, they insult God, and their prayers will not avail. For in that case they must feel that it is a mere matter of common justice for God to pour out his Spirit, before he can justly require Christians to work, or sinners to repent.

Suppose a church get the idea that sinners are poor, unfortunate creatures, who come into the world with such a nature that they can't help sinning, and that sinners are just as unable to repent and believe the gospel as they are to fly to the moon, how can they feel that the sinner is a rebel against God, and that he deserves to be sent to hell? How can they feel that the sinner is to blame? And how can they take God's part when they pray? If they do not take God's part against the sinner, they cannot expect God will regard their prayers, for they do not pray with right motives. No doubt one great reason why so many prayers are not answered, is that those who pray do in fact take the sinner's part against God. They pray as if the sinner was a poor unfortunate being, to be pitied, rather than as if he was a guilty wretch, to be blamed. And the reason is that they do not believe sinners are able to obey God. If a person does not believe that sinners are able to obey their Maker, and really believes that the Spirit's influences are necessary to make him able, it is impossible, with these views, to offer acceptable and prevailing prayer for the sinner, and it is not wonderful that persons with these views should not prevail with God, and should doubt about the efficacy of the prayer of faith.

How often do you hear people pray for sinners in this style, "O Lord, help this poor soul to do what he is required to do—O Lord, enable him to do so and so."—Now this language implies that they take the sinner's part, and not God's. It was understood by those who use it, as it is sometimes explained, and if people meant by it what they ought to mean when they plead for sinners, I would not find so much fault with it. But the truth is, that when people use this language, they often mean just what the language itself would be naturally at first sight, understood to mean, which is just as if they should pray, "O Lord, thou commandest these poor sinners to repent, when, O Lord, thou knowest they cannot repent, unless thou givest them thy Spirit, to enable them to do it, though thou hast declared that thou wilt send them to hell if they do not, whether they ever receive the Spirit or not; and now, Lord, this seems very hard, and we pray thee to have pity upon these poor creatures, and do not deal so hardly with them, for Christ's sake." Who does not see that such a prayer, or a prayer which means this, whatever language it may be couched in, is an insult to God, charging him with infinite injustice, if he continues to exact from sinners a duty which they are unable to perform without that aid which he will not grant. People may pray in this way till the day of judgment, and never obtain a blessing, because they take the sinner's part against God. They cannot pray successfully, until they understand that the sinner is a rebel, and obstinate in his rebellion—so obstinate that he never will, without the Holy Spirit, do what he might do as well as not, instantly, and this obstinacy is the reason, and the only reason, why he needs the influence of the Holy Spirit for his conversion. The only ground on which the sinner needs divine agency is to overcome his obstinacy, and make him willing to do what he can do, and what God justly requires him to do. And a church are never in an attitude in which God will hear their united prayers, unless they are agreed in so understanding their dependence on God, as to feel it in perfect con-

sistency with the sinner's blame. If it is the other way, they are agreed in understanding it wrong, and their prayers for divine help to the unfortunate instead of divine favor to make a rebel submit, are wide of the mark, are an insult to God, and they never will obtain favor in heaven.

(3.) They must be agreed in understanding that revivals are not miracles, but that they are brought about by the use of means like other events. No wonder revivals formerly came so seldom and continued so short a time, when people generally regarded them as miracles, or like a meteor shower of rain, that will come on a place and continue a little while, and then blow over; that is, as something over which we have no control. For what can a people do to get a shower of rain? Or how can they make it rain any longer than it does rain? It is necessary that those who pray should be agreed in understanding a revival as something to be brought about by means, or they never will be agreed in using them.

(4.) They must be agreed in understanding that human agency is just as indispensable to a revival as divine agency. Such a thing as a revival of religion, I venture to say, never did occur without divine agency, and never did occur without human agency. How often do people say, "God can, if he pleases, carry on the work without means." But I have no faith in it, for there is no evidence of it.—What is religion? Obedience to God's law. But the law cannot be obeyed unless it is known. And how can God make sinners obey but by making known his commandments? And how can he make them known but by revealing them himself, or sending them by others—that is, by bringing THE TRUTH to bear upon the person's mind till he obeys it.—God never did and never can convert a sinner except with the truth. What is conversion? Obeying the truth. He may communicate it himself, directly to the sinner. But then, the sinner's own agency is indispensable, for conversion consists in the right employment of the sinner's own agency. And ordinarily, he employs the agency of others also, in printing, writing, conversation, & preaching. God has put the gospel treasure in earthen vessels. He has seen fit to employ men in preaching the word. That is, he has seen that human agency is that which he can best employ in saving sinners. And if there ever was a case, of which we have no evidence, there is not one in a thousand, if one in a million, converted in any other way than through the truth, made known and urged by human instrumentality. And as the church must be united in using those means, it is plainly necessary that they should be united in understanding the true reason why means are to be used, and the true principles on which they are to be governed and applied.

5. It is important that there should be union in regard to the measures essential to the promotion of a revival. Let individuals agree to do any thing whatever, and if they are not agreed in their measures, they will run into confusion, and counteract one another. Set them to sail a ship, and they never can get along without agreement. If they attempt to do business as merchants when they are not agreed in their measures, what will they do? Why, they will only undo each others work, and thwart the whole business of the concern. All this is pre-eminently true in regard to the work of promoting a revival. Otherwise the members of the church will counteract each others influence, and they need not expect a revival.

(1.) The church must be agreed in regard to the meetings which are held, as to what meeting shall be held, and how many, and where, and when they shall be held. Some people always desire to multiply meetings in a revival, as if the more meetings they had, the more religion.—Others are always opposed to any new meetings in a revival. Some are always for having a protracted meeting, and others are never ready to hold a protracted meeting at all. Whatever difference there may be, it is essential that the church should come to a good understanding on the subject, so that they go on together in harmony, and labor with zeal and effect.

(2.) They must be agreed as to the manner of conducting meetings. It is necessary that the church should be united and cordial on this subject, if they expect to offer united prayer with effect.—Sometimes there are individuals who want to adopt every new thing they can hear of or imagine, while others are totally unwilling to have any thing altered in regard to the manner of the meeting, but would have every thing done precisely as they are accustomed to. They ought to be agreed in some way, either to have the meetings altered, or to keep them on in the old way. The best possible way is, for the church to agree in this, that they will let the meetings go on and take their course, just as the Spirit of God shapes them, and not even attempt to make two meetings just alike. The church never will give the fullest effect to the truth, until they are agreed in this principle.—That in promoting a revival they will accommodate their measures to circumstances, and not attempt to interrupt the natural course which pious feeling and sound judgment indicate, but cast themselves en-

tirely upon the guidance and direction of the Holy Spirit, introducing any measure, at any time, that shall seem called for in the Providence of God, without laying any stress upon its being new or old.

6. They must be agreed in the manner of dealing with impenitent sinners. This is a point immensely important, that the church should be agreed in their treatment of sinners. Suppose that they are not agreed, and one will tell a sinner one thing and another another. What confusion! How can they agree in prayer, when it is plain that they are not agreed as to the things they shall pray for. Go among such a church, and hear them pray for sinners. Attend a prayer-meeting and listen. Here is one man praying that the sinners present may repent.—Another prays that they may be convicted, and perhaps, if he is very much engaged, will go so far as to pray that they may be deeply convicted. Another prays that sinners may go home solemn, and pensive, and silent, meditating upon the truths they have heard. Another prays in such a manner, that you can see he is afraid to have them converted now. Another prays very solemnly that they may not attempt to do any thing in their own strength.—And so on. How easy it is to see that the church are not agreed as touching the things they ask for, and of course they have no interest in the promise.

If you set them to talk with sinners, their courses would be just as discordant, for it is plain that they are not agreed, and have no clear views in regard to what a sinner must do to be saved, or of what ought to be said to sinners, to bring them to repent. And the consequence is, that sinners who are awakened and anxious, presently get confounded, and do not know what to do, and perhaps give it all up in despair, or conclude there is in reality nothing rational or consistent in religion. One will tell the sinner he must repent, immediately. Another will give him a book, Doddridge's Rise and Progress of the Soul, and tell him to read that book.—Another will tell him he must pray and persevere, and in God's time he will obtain the blessing. A revival can never go on, for any length of time, amidst such difficulties. If it begins, it must soon run out; unless, perhaps, the body of the church will keep still and say nothing at all, and let others carry on the work.—And there the work will suffer materially for want of their co-operation and support. A church ought to be agreed. Every Christian ought to have a clear understanding of this subject, and all speak the same thing, and give the same directions. And the sinner will find no one to take his part, and can get no relief or comfort till he repents.

7. They must be agreed in removing the impediments to a revival. If a church expects a revival, they must take up the stumbling blocks out of the way.

(1.) In the exercise of discipline. If there are rotten members in the church, they should be removed, and the church should all agree to cut them off. If they remain in the church, they are such a reproach to religion, as to hinder a revival. Sometimes when an attempt is made to cast them out, this creates division, and thus the work is stopped. Sometimes the offenders are persons of influence, or they have family friends who will take their part, and make a party, and thus create a bad spirit, and prevent a revival.

(2.) In mutual confessions. Whenever wrong has been done to any, there should be a full confession. I do not mean a cold and forced acknowledgement, such as saying, "If I have done wrong, I am sorry for it." But a hearty confession, going the full length of the wrong, and showing that it comes out of a broken heart.

(3.) Forgiveness of enemies. A great obstruction to revivals is often found in the fact that active and leading individuals harbor a revengeful and unforgiving spirit towards those who have injured them, which destroys their spirituality, makes them harsh and disagreeable in their manner, and prevents them from enjoying either communion with God in prayer, or the blessing of God to give them success in labor. But let the members of a church be truly agreed, in breaking down and confessing their own faults, and in cherishing a tender, merciful, forgiving, Christ-like spirit toward those who they think have done them wrong, and then the Spirit will come down upon them not by measure.

(4.) They must be agreed in making all the necessary preparations for a revival. They should be agreed in having all necessary preparation made, and agreed in bearing their part of the labor or expense of making it. There should be an equality, and not let a few be burdened and the rest do little or nothing, but every one his proportion, according to his several ability. Then there will be no envying nor jealousy, nor any of those mutual recriminations and altercations and disrespectful remarks about one another, which are so inconsistent with brotherly love, and such a stumbling block in the way of sinners.

9. They must be agreed in doing heartily whatever is necessary to be done for the promotion of the revival. Sometimes a slight disagreement about a very little thing will be allowed to break in and destroy a revival. A minister told me that he once went to labor in a place as an